

burst like popcorn

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by [effervescentlies](#)

Summary

Dream and George work together at a movie theatre over the summer, and George's antics are starting to get on Dream's nerves.

He doesn't think his work life can get any worse. But when Dream realizes that he doesn't hate his co-worker as much as he thought he did, things start to spiral out of control.

His newfound crush is starting to become a little bit of a problem.

(loosely inspired by "sunny with a chance of sprinkles" by meridies!)

Notes

did i spend three days writing this instead of working on my already ongoing fic (figure skates and hockey blades, which u should def go read)? yes. but did i have fun writing it? mostly yes!

this fic was loosely inspired by [sunny with a chance of sprinkles by meridies](#)!! please do go read it :)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The chill of air conditioning blasts Dream in the face as soon as he walks in, a welcome change from the blistering sun outside. He walks past bustling movie-goers buying tickets, waves at his co-workers, and makes his way to the staff room in the back of the building.

George is already there, sitting at one of the metal bar tables in the corner of the room, because of course he is. He's been early to his shifts every single day for the past two weeks that Dream has been working at the theatre.

"You're here earlier than usual," says George, aimlessly scrolling through his phone.

Dream opens his locker and sets his bag down inside. "Am I?"

"It's one-twenty," George announces. He points a finger at the clock hanging over the door. "You usually arrive at one-twenty-five. Five minutes before your shift starts."

"I just wanted to show up early to work and get prepared. Like I'm *supposed* to," says Dream, pinning his name tag to his shirt.

George narrows his eyes. There's a beat of silence as he takes the time to scrutinize Dream. And then: "No," George says, smiling, "I think you wanted to get here before me."

Dream scrunches up his face and whips around to face George, who's still perched up on the bar stool looking as smug as ever. "Not true," he retorts, like a liar.

"I think you did," teases George. "You're trying to beat me to work."

"I can assure you that I am *not* —"

"That's really unprofessional of you, Dream," George says sagely. "And to think it's only your second week working here. It'll be sad to see you go."

"What?"

"I mean, I won't be sad. I might feel pity for you, like in a pathetic sort of way, but I won't be upset."

Dream scoffs and represses the urge to roll his eyes at his co-worker. Out of everyone else that he could have the same shifts as, it had to be George.

"You should be," Dream counters after a moment. "If I get fired, who else are you going to annoy every day?"

George hums and resumes scrolling through his Instagram feed. "They'll just replace you with some other dumbass high school kid looking for a summer job."

"Aren't you also a dumbass high school kid with a summer job?" Dream points out in protest.

"Take out the part where you said dumbass. And this isn't my summer job — I've been working here for *months*."

Dream slams his locker closed with much more force than intended. He checks his uniform in the mirror — puts on his cap, dusts off his black pants — and turns back around.

George moves quickly. He's already stowed his phone in his locker and is punching numbers into

the time clock hung on the wall, clocking into work.

When he's done, he looks up to check the time. "And three... two... one..." George's face breaks into a Cheshire cat-like grin. "It's official! It's one-thirty-one. Dream is officially *late to work*."

Dream snaps his head up to look at the clock so fast that he thinks he's got whiplash. "Oh, come on," he protests, striding across the room to use the time clock. "I'm right here! And it was only by a minute."

"A minute is still a minute *late*."

"Shut up."

George cackles like the asshole co-worker that he is. Opens the door to the staff room and lets it slowly swing closed behind him. And, once he's down the hall, he shouts:

"See you at concessions, Dream!"

Dream does indeed see George at concessions. He sees him at concessions that day, and the next, and the next.

George makes fun of him every time, and it's starting to get a little bit unbearable.

It's a slow day today; there's only a few people coming into the movie theatre and even fewer buying snacks. Dream is helping a customer buy a few bags of candy while George waits for a customer of his own.

"Your total is seven dollars and twenty-five cents," says Dream, and before he can continue —

"Cash or credit?" George asks the customer. There's a sickly sweet smile on his face.

The customer's eyes dash between the two. "Uh, credit?"

Dream glares down at George, who only looks up and gives a bright, mocking grin back.

"Great," says Dream loudly, not giving George the time to respond. "I'll get that set up for you."

"Oh no, let me," George says primly. He shoves a hand over, completely invading Dream's personal space, and moves to tap the credit button — on *Dream's* register!

Dream grabs George's wrist and taps the button before he can. "I can handle this transaction *on my own*, but I appreciate the offer."

"No," replies George, all high-pitched and doubtful. He shoves the card reader into the customer's face. Awkwardly, they take it and tap their credit card on it.

Lightning quick, the two reach for the reader at the same time. Before Dream can realize what's going on, his hand is already tightly clasped on top of George's. Heat shoots up Dream's arm in anger.

George stares icily at Dream in a silent challenge. He yanks his arm back — but Dream's unfortunately stronger and wrenches it out of his grasp. George screws his face up in discontent. Then, turns back towards the customer.

"I'd like to apologize for Dream's behaviour," George says, sounding insincere. "I let him know

about his unprofessionalism a few days ago, but he just hasn't made an effort to improve yet."

Dream is barely holding it together. "Here's your receipt," he says, teeth gritted. Dream thinks he's about to burst like one of the kernels in the popcorn machine behind him.

The customer slides the candy off the table and scurries away with a terrified look on their face.

"Have a nice day!" George calls out after them, waving.

Dream takes a deep breath and tries not to yell in the workplace. "What," he starts, "the *fuck* was that?"

Feigning innocence, George turns towards the popcorn machine and tries to look busy. "Swearing at work? You're being unprofessional *again*, Dream."

"Oh, shut the fuck up. As if you didn't swear that time last week when you spilled that drink all over the floor."

"I stopped myself," George corrects. "I said 'shoot'. You can ask."

"Ask who?" Dream exclaims, incredulous. "The customer?"

George rolls his eyes. "Who else? You know what, let's look through the transaction logs from last week and try to find them. Then you can ask."

"Stop trying to change the subject!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," George says coolly. "Oh look, there's another customer coming! Hello, welcome!"

Dream stares at the popcorn machine and tries not to explode in exasperation.

"Are you *kidding* me?"

They're in theatre number five after a showing of the newest Disney movie. The screen is blank and the lights are dim, yet bright enough for Dream to see the absolute *disaster* of a mess that the theatre's lovely patrons have left behind.

"I didn't know people could be this *disgusting*," Dream complains, holding up a soda cup with a gloved hand. The contents of the cup are long gone, spilt all over the floor and leaving it sticky.

George picks up a broom and starts sweeping stray popcorn off the floor. "Kids' movies are like the worst to clean up after," he says. "This isn't even that bad."

Dream raises his eyebrows. "Yeah? What have you seen?"

"Diapers, baby bottles, snacks that people snuck in, *alcohol*," George rattles off, listing on his fingers. "There's a reason why they don't let the high schoolers clean up after, uh, *R-rated movies*."

Dream curls his lip up, scrunches up his nose, and makes a face of disgust. "No way. You're lying."

"I'm telling the truth!" George insists. He gestures at the seats. "I bet you there's a diaper in here somewhere."

“How are you so sure?” Dream questions, throwing away an empty bag of sour gummies.

George points to his head. “Math. Statistics.”

“Alright, I’ll take your bet,” Dream says, confident. “What are you offering?”

“Whoever wins has to give the other their pay for the *day*.”

Dream scoffs. “I’m not agreeing to that. No way.”

George laughs, leans on his broom like a cane. “No, no, I was joking. How about whoever wins has to... buy the other a bag of popcorn?”

“Deal,” says Dream, reaching over the seats to shake George's hand.

George wins, obviously, when he triumphantly holds up a diaper found in the second-to-last row of seats. Dream, despite the crushing loss, laughs. He’s never seen someone look happier to find a diaper.

“My payment, please?” asks George at concessions when the theatre is all cleaned out and their shift is nearly over.

Begrudgingly, Dream pulls out his wallet and rings up a large bag of popcorn on the register.

“No, wait — I want to be like a real customer,” says George. He looks around, checks if anybody is nearby, and slips around the counter. “Alright, go.”

“What?”

George, on the other side of the register, crosses his arms. “Treat me like a regular customer. Just like anyone else.”

Dream exhales, loud and heavy. “Hello,” he says. “Welcome. How can I help you.”

George frowns and tilts his head. “This is terrible customer service. I’m disappointed, really.”

Dream throws up his hands. “This wasn’t part of the bet!”

“I’m going to have to ask if I can speak to your manager.”

“Oh my God.”

George cackles at Dream’s misfortune. “I have a coupon here, a voucher, from someone here named *Dream* who promised me a bag of popcorn,” he says haughtily.

“Dream doesn’t work here anymore,” Dream deadpans. “He died after his co-worker annoyed him to death.”

“Well, I’m sure he can still buy me that popcorn from beyond the grave,” replies George. He raises his eyebrows in fake contempt.

Scowling, Dream rings up the popcorn. Slips a ten-dollar bill into the register and counts himself the change. Turns to grab a large bag and scoops popcorn into it until it’s heaping full.

Behind him, George calls, “Can you add extra butter to it, please?”

Dream obliges, but has to resist himself from just *drenching* the popcorn in buttery goodness. He doesn't want this interaction to last any longer than it possibly can.

"Your popcorn, *sir*," mocks Dream, handing the bag over the counter.

George takes it from him and hugs the bag against himself with two hands. He pops a few kernels into his mouth and, exaggeratedly, goes: "Mmm. Delicious. Thank you *very* much."

And he struts off towards the staff room, leaving Dream still grumbling behind the counter.

Dream takes off his cap and runs a hand through his hair.

What the fuck.

They make more bets. Lots and lots more bets. If Dream didn't know any better, he'd think that George has a gambling problem.

Today, Dream and George are working at the box office. They're in charge of selling and distributing movie tickets to patrons.

"Ten dollars that the couple over there is buying tickets to the new Wonder Woman movie," says George, nodding towards the pair.

"Deal," agrees Dream, a little too easily.

Maybe he has a little bit of a gambling problem too.

The couple steps up to George's register. He immediately puts on his trademarked customer service smile. "Welcome! How can I help you?"

"Hi, can I get two standard tickets to Wonder Woman, please?"

Dream balls his hands into fists to stop himself from facepalming. George beams impossibly wider.

"Great! Good choice," says George, punching in the buttons to the register. "I saw it myself last week. My co-worker Dream here doesn't like it though. He lost ten dollars from his wallet after watching it."

"Oh no! That's terrible," says the customer.

George nods slowly. "It really is. Dream was *really* upset when he realized. Right, Dream?" he asks, looking up at him expectantly.

Biting his lower lip nearly hard enough to draw blood, Dream plays along. "I was," he says dryly. "It was terrible."

"It really was," George emphasizes. He finishes the transaction and hands the couple their tickets. "There you go. Thank you so much!" he says sweetly.

When the couple leaves, Dream's mind flicks through hundreds of possibilities on how to respond next. He settles for punching George in the arm.

"Ow!"

"What the hell! This is *rigged* against me —"

“It’s really not —”

“— you *always* win —”

“— I’ve been working here for *way longer* than you have —”

“That doesn’t mean anything —”

“You punched me, I’m getting you written up for creating a toxic work environment —”

“Oh come on,” Dream interrupts, “If there’s anyone here that should get written up for creating a toxic work environment, it’s *you*.”

George holds out a hand. “Just give me the ten dollars. Before someone sees and we *both* get written up.”

Dream grumbles and reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wrinkled ten-dollar bill. George’s eyes light up at the sight of it and he carefully tucks the bill into his own back pocket.

Much of Dream’s paycheck is going towards George. Things are starting to get problematic.

Except, this time, maybe they’re not.

On a particularly busy day, it’s swelteringly hot outside. People seeking refuge inside the air-conditioned theatre chatter and flit about the lobby. The line at concessions is long and winding.

Shifts have just changed over — Dream gets a “good luck” from a leaving employee as he walks behind the counter and looks the crowd over.

“I bet you *fifty dollars* —”

“*No more bets*,” moans Dream, covering his face with his hands.

George frowns. “Okay, this isn’t a bet then. It’s a competition.”

As much as he hates to admit it, Dream’s interest is piqued. He curses his competitive nature, wonders why he wants to win so badly.

“Go on,” he says, not wanting to hold up the line any longer.

“Two registers, two lines. Whoever can get through their line the fastest wins.”

Dream nods. “Okay, let’s do it.”

And then the two are rushing through each order. George plasters on a smile, impatiently asks each customer what they’d like to drink; Dream turns his voice sprightly and energetic, taps hard enough on the register’s screen to nearly crack the glass.

At the popcorn machine, George shovels popcorn into bags haphazardly and whips back around to fill a cup with iced tea. But Dream is faster, he’s smarter, and he’s mastered the art of multitasking.

Dream, silently, takes the time to praise the creator of auto-filling soda machines, the kind that stops automatically once the cup is full. He fills two soda cups at once all while scooping a heaping portion of french fries into a cardboard box. When he’s done, he slides the order over the

counter and loudly calls, “Next!”

Here’s the thing about George that Dream has learnt quite recently: he doesn’t play fair. Dream knows this because last week, George had bet twenty dollars that he could clean his half of the theatre faster than Dream. Foolishly, Dream had agreed and let George split the theatre in two.

Later that night, when Dream was in bed sound asleep, he woke up in a cold sweat after realizing that George had given himself the side where the *door to the theatre was* . Meaning that George had *six whole seats* less to clean.

George had merely cackled when Dream brought it up the next day in the staff room, citing something about how “you agreed to it!”

So it’s no surprise when George brushes behind Dream to grab something and exclaims, “oops!”

Dream whips around, expecting the worst.

And it is — sort of.

The stack of popcorn bags on Dream’s side of the popcorn machine is completely toppled over, all strewn across the floor.

“What the fuck,” is what Dream wants to say, but he doesn’t.

“I’ll clean this up,” George offers, and in one fell swoop he scoops up the bags and dumps them in the trash. “We can’t use these anymore,” he explains, “they were on the floor.”

“Right,” agrees Outside Dream. “Food safety.”

Inside Dream, the real Dream, wants to scream.

But he doesn’t let that stop him. Under the counter, he grabs a fresh set of popcorn bags and keeps on going. He talks his throat hoarse greeting each customer. Wears his legs down until they’re sluggish and sore. Fills up soda cups so many times he thinks he could do it in his sleep.

The lines wear down slowly but surely, and an hour later the rush is gone. Dream smiles harder than he ever has when he passes a bag of popcorn to his last customer in line. George shoots him a glare while ringing up a particularly large order of popcorn and fries from a family of six.

“Finally,” Dream breathes once they’re gone, “I won!”

“That was so unfair. Everyone in my line ordered at least *two* bags of popcorn,” George huffs.

Dream shakes his head and grins. “No it wasn’t — you cheated and I *still* won!”

“There were no established rules,” George protests haughtily, “so it doesn’t count as cheating.”

“Whatever you want to call it, it doesn’t matter. I won.” Dream towers over George and pushes a finger into the centre of his chest.

George stares down at his chest, then rolls his eyes and looks to the side. “Fine. What do you want?”

“What do I want?”

“You won, congrats. You get a prize. What do you want?” asks George.

Dream takes the moment to relish in the sweet, sweet victory. This is rare, after all — finally having leverage over George. He considers his options thoughtfully.

“Be realistic,” George reminds, and half of Dream’s ideas are shut down just like that.

“I know what I want,” announces Dream, after a moment.

George ticks up his eyebrow. “Let’s hear it then.”

“Starting tomorrow, for the entire *month* , no more making fun of me —”

“What the *fu* —”

“ — it’s my turn to make fun of *you*. And then we’re even,” Dream demands.

“This is not realistic,” complains George.

“You offered a prize,” says Dream, “and I think if I can get through a month of your bullshit, you can get through a month of mine.”

“Fine,” George gripes, snappy.

They shake on it. Dream thinks his hand slots nicely together with George’s.

And that’s the end of that.

At least, until the next day.

Dream is absolutely giddy for a multitude of reasons.

Firstly: today is the day that his work life *finally* begins to change. His month of suffering is over, and Dream can see the glorious light at the end of the tunnel. He’s taken control of the situation, and now he can tease George relentlessly with no objections.

Secondly: George is *late to work* . But not technically. George’s shift hasn’t started yet, but it’s only ten minutes before it does and he’s still not here. This is a first for him — he’s always arrived before Dream, always mocked Dream for coming in after him.

Now the tables have turned, and it’s Dream’s time to shine. He’s perched up on the barstool in the staff room, waiting for the familiar cropped brown hair to peek in through the door. Dream deduces in his boredom that George is probably late because he doesn’t want to endure Dream’s antics.

Dream also deduces that it’s boring when there’s no one around to talk to.

Thirdly: Dream was so excited for the day that he picked up an order of his favorite smoothie as a reward before work. He even *walked* to work under the Floridian sunshine with the cold drink to cool him down. But that’s neither here nor there.

So it’s all shaping up to be a perfect day.

And then George walks in, looking absolutely *miserable*.

“Go ahead,” he says with a sigh, holding his arms up. “Make fun of me. I came in after you today.”

Dream grins. “It’s one-twenty-five,” he announces, mimicking their previous conversation, “You usually come in at one- *twenty* .”

George opens his locker. Stuffs his bag inside. “Do I?”

“You do,” says Dream. “I think you came in late on purpose.”

“I didn’t, actually —”

“I expected better from you, George. I might have to report you for coming in late.” Dream tsks and shakes his head.

To his disappointment, George just sighs. Runs a hand through his hair. Shuts his locker closed and fiddles with the lock. “Go ahead.”

Dream frowns.

At the box office, George smiles at each patron and is as helpful as ever. Dream stands back, arms crossed, watching silently.

Today was supposed to be fun, wasn’t it? He was supposed to make fun of George all day, rile him up and embarrass him in front of the customers like George always did to him.

He has the opportunity to do it now. Walk up behind George and press a finger onto the screen, taking over the transaction.

So why can’t he bring himself to do it?

“Have a nice day!” George says to the customer, waving goodbye.

Dream just tilts his head and tries to think about his predicament a little harder.

“Hey,” George says, pulling him out of his daze. He jabs a finger into Dream’s forearm. “You’re acting weird today.”

“Am I?” Dream squeaks out.

“You were supposed to like, I don’t know, make fun of me in front of the customers. Or tell them that I’m a new hire or something,” George points out, unhelpfully.

Dream freezes. His brain malfunctions, short-circuits, and stops working entirely. When it finally boots back up, he settles for a lie.

“I’m saving all that for later,” he replies snarkily. “I can’t use up all my cards at once.”

George contemplates this. “Okay,” he says slowly. “Next time then.”

There is no next time. Every single time Dream opens his mouth to offer a witty comment or snide remark, he stops himself short. It’s starting to drive himself a little bit crazy.

Dream takes the weekend off and convinces himself he needs a mental health break from work. He stays in bed all day, staring at the ceiling and wondering where he went so *wrong*.

The next time Dream and George see each other is, surprisingly, outside of work.

“Dream,” George calls out. They’re at an outdoor mall bustling with people carrying shopping bags and ice creams to cool down from the heat.

As much as Dream wants to run off and hide, George has already seen his face. He stuffs his hands into his pockets and walks towards him. They take a seat on a nearby bench. “Hello,” Dream greets.

George tilts his head. “You didn’t show up to work yesterday.”

“I was feeling sick,” Dream replies.

It’s a half-truth — he was feeling sick, but not in a “I have a cold” sort of way. More like a “I’m feeling really, *really* weird and nauseous for no particular reason” sort of way.

Desperate to fill the silence, Dream tries to change the subject. Clears his throat and asks, “What’s in the bag?”

“Oh,” George says sheepishly. “You’re going to make fun of me.”

“No,” Dream says a little too quickly. “I won’t.”

George pulls the plastic bag up onto his knees. “You promise?”

“Promise.”

Inside the bag is a box of brand new sneakers, shiny and bright white. “I collect shoes,” George admits. “I bought it with the money from our bets.”

“Oh my God,” gasps Dream, “You’re a hypebeast.”

“You said you weren’t going to make fun of me!”

Dream laughs for the first time all day. “No, no — I wasn’t. I think it’s cool.”

George gives a little smile and slips the box back into the bag. “Yeah, it’s fun.”

A beat of silence.

“Hey,” says Dream, before he can overthink it. “Can we go back to the way things were before?”

“Before?”

“Before our last bet,” Dream replies, scratching the back of his neck. “Or we can just call it even.”

“Oh,” says George, surprised. “Okay. I just thought you’d want to rub it in my face a little more that you won.”

Dream shakes his head. “No. It’s fine,” he says.

George smiles brightly and holds out a hand. “Alright, deal,” he says, shaking on it.

“Deal.”

“Should I eat it?”

Dream and George are inside theatre number three cleaning up the mess that their lovely guests

have left behind. George is holding up a half empty bag of popcorn found on one of the seats.

“What is *wrong* with you?” Dream exclaims, disgusted.

George frowns and looks inside the bag. “Look! People just waste this food. It’s terrible.”

“It’s disgusting, that’s what it is,” comments Dream, picking up a box of french fries. Ketchup is smeared all over the lid.

“Is this disgusting?”

Dream opens his mouth to ask what George is talking about, but the words die on his tongue when a fistful of stale popcorn hits him in the face.

“What the — why would you —” Dream stammers in shock.

George laughs, loud and clear, and Dream feels heat rise in his chest.

“You’re lucky none of that landed in my mouth,” Dream threatens.

“You’d probably like to have things in your mouth,” George snickers, and before he realizes what’s happening —

Dream launches the box of fries into George’s face. The grease smears over his face and the ketchup smears over the front of his shirt as the box falls to the ground with an ugly *plop* noise.

George stands there, unmoving, eyes closed and nose scrunched up.

Regret hits Dream like a truck. “Oh shit, George, did I —”

With all the force he can muster, George tosses the bag, sending bits of popcorn flying forward. Dream spits out the stray kernels that landed in his mouth.

“Oh my God —”

Dream rushes forward to grab the bag out of George’s hands, but George turns and hugs it close to his chest. Dream comes up behind and wraps his arms around him in a futile attempt to wrench his arms apart, but George is unfortunately stronger than he looks.

George stumbles forward in surprise, falling on top of the plush theatre seats. Dream falls together with him, the two tangled together in an ungraceful heap.

For a moment, Dream freezes. George, pinned between Dream and the seats, looks up at him with dark, wide eyes.

“Uh,” says Dream, intelligently.

He quickly remembers what he’s meant to be doing and snatches the bag of popcorn out of George’s grasp, which has turned loose. The bag has torn and is now empty, but that doesn’t take away from the victory.

“Ha!” Dream exclaims. He scrambles off of George and to his feet. “I win.”

“You got old popcorn in your mouth. I think *I* won,” George retorts, rubbing his back. “That *hurt*.”

Dream dumps the bag of popcorn in the trash. “You have ketchup and grease all over you.”

George hums in understanding. “Fair,” he says, “Uh, I’m going to wash my face.” He disposes of his gloves and walks out of the theatre, leaving Dream to pick up the pieces of the mess left behind.

Pressing the backs of his hands to his cheeks, Dream tries to ignore the heat spreading across his face. Looks away from the seats where he and George were tangled on top of earlier. Turns, and moves on to clean another part of the theatre.

Dream’s newfound infatuation has become a problem.

It’s gotten to the point where it’s difficult for Dream to come into work. He doesn’t want a repeat of that incident — at least, not anytime soon.

“You’re late *again*,” George announces when Dream sidles up next to him at the box office.

“Sorry,” Dream says sheepishly.

George greets a patron, and while punching in their movie of choice, says, “That’s the third time this week.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Dream repeats. “I’ve just got stuff going on.”

“Don’t worry about it,” George reassures. “I won’t, like, report you or anything.”

“Thanks,” mumbles Dream.

When the patron has left with their tickets, George turns to Dream with a radiant smile. “Wanna do another bet?”

Dream raises an eyebrow. “We haven’t done a bet in a while.”

“Yeah,” says George, “that’s *exactly* why we should do one.”

“Okay,” Dream replies. “What’d you have in mind?”

George narrows his eyes and looks across the theatre. “That group over there,” he nods towards them, “what movie do you think they’ll see?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Just take a guess,” George says encouragingly, and how can Dream say no?

“Uh, okay.” Dream looks the group over; they’re a couple of teen boys no older than fifteen. “That re-screening of John Wick?”

George tilts his chin up. “Good choice,” he says. “I think they’ll see Tenet.”

“And what are you offering?”

“If I win, you have to kiss me.”

Dream blinks. His heart starts beating fast enough to thump out of his chest. “What?”

“Fuck, they went into that horror movie,” George groans, leaning over the counter. He turns back towards Dream. “I was joking,” he says, like he can read Dream’s mind. “And I lost, anyways. So you don’t have to kiss me.”

“Yeah,” Dream breathes out awkwardly.

George giggles. His eyes are crinkled at the edges with glee. “You’d probably like it, too.”

Yeah, Dream thinks. He would.

Somehow, things get worse. Worse than all the teasing, the mocking, the irritation that Dream feels every time George makes a stupid taunting comment.

“I’m exhausted,” George says offhandedly at the end of a long shift. He pulls his cap off and throws it onto the counter. His pale, skinny hand runs through the front bit of his hair — the part Dream loves, where it’s floppy and covers his forehead — and Dream thinks maybe he needs to stop staring at his friend? Enemy? Co-worker?

The lines, once obvious and blaring, are too muddled to tell.

“Me too,” Dream says, trying to busy himself by counting up the money in the cash register. “Long day.”

“I’ll clean over here,” George offers. He grabs a rag, sprays the counter with disinfectant, and starts wiping.

Dream glances out the window. It’s a typical summer night — the clock reads nine in the evening, yet the sun is still halfway up in the sky, painting it in pretty oranges and purples.

It’s silent for a moment as they work. The theatre’s guests are all long gone, leaving the two of them to close up the concessions stand.

“Ugh,” sounds George, “look at all the leftover popcorn. I hate closing up. We have to dump all of it.”

It’s true — the popcorn machine still holds enough to fill a few bags, and corporate policy says that all leftover food must be disposed of at the end of the day.

There is a loophole, however.

Dream grins. “We don’t *have* to,” he says.

“Are we allowed to do this?” George hisses.

They’re in theatre number eight, the lights dimmed and an old Harry Potter movie projected onto the screen. Dream has a cup of soda on his left and George sits to his right, looking nervous. In between them, there’s an extra large bucket of popcorn.

Dream frowns. “I think so,” he says.

“You *think* so?”

“*You think so?*” Dream parrots, mocking his accent. George rolls his eyes. “It’s fine. Relax.”

“If I get fired because of you, I’m never letting it go,” George grumbles.

“Popcorn?” asks Dream. He shoves the bucket in George’s face, who takes it reluctantly.

The movie plays on. “This is the best part,” George comments at one point.

Despite the action of the movie, all swelling music and flashes of light, he can’t seem to pay attention. Dream drums his fingers on his knee and suffers in silence, sipping his soda.

He looks over to George, who’s still intensely focused on the movie. Watches as the light from the screen reflects back on him, casting his face in a multitude of pretty colors and shadows. Observes his little reactions and comments to each scene, even though George has probably seen this movie too many times to count.

Dream doesn’t even notice that George has stopped eating his popcorn until George takes a deep breath and whips around to face him.

“Are you going to kiss me, already?”

Dream cranes his neck forward, eyes going wide. “What?”

“You’ve been staring at me all night,” George says. “It’s getting weird.”

“No, no,” stammers Dream, “I haven’t — I didn’t mean to —”

George takes a long sip of soda. “You’d think the guy who asks you out on a *date* would be a little more forward.”

“This is a *date*?”

“You asked me, the person who you’ve been flirting with for the past *month*, to watch my favourite movie with you. Alone. After work. You paid for the food, too.” George frowns and props his head up with his hands.

“*Flirting*?”

“I thought you liked me,” George says pitifully.

“*You knew*?” Dream shrieks. He thinks he’s about to explode yet again. George seems to have that effect around him.

“I mean, it was pretty obvious.” George shrugs. “I just thought I’d rip the band-aid off and say it out loud.” His confidence is something Dream knows well, but George’s sudden forwardness still catches him off guard.

“Oh my God,” says Dream, and he covers his rapidly blushing face with his hands. “Oh my God. Oh my *fucking* God.”

George merely keeps watching the movie and tosses another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

“Why didn’t you *say* anything?” Dream moans, sinking down into his seat.

“I didn’t want to embarrass you,” George replies, not even bothering to make eye contact.

Dream crosses his arms like a small child. “You already do that every day.”

“True.”

“So wait,” Dream says. He sits up in his chair. “You *like* me? Romantically?”

George turns to face Dream. Blinks, and says, “You are so *bad* at this.”

“You do!” Dream exclaims, eyes bright.

“I thought I made it obvious when I asked you to kiss me,” George protests.

“Okay,” says Dream, nodding. He clears his throat. “Can I kiss you, then?”

“...You actually suck at this.”

“Can I?”

George smiles, all bright teeth and sparkling eyes. “Yeah.”

Dream leans over the armrest, and the straw of George’s drink hits clumsily against his chest. A pair of lips press against his, soft and warm. They kiss warily — still young, inexperienced, trying to work things out together — but when they pull apart to take a breath, George leans forward again and moves more surely, more practiced.

A cold hand threads through the hair at the base of Dream’s neck, another rests on his shoulder. Dream cups George’s cheek with his own and gently swipes his thumb over. He relishes in the smooth, supple skin, the warm glow that spreads beneath.

When they pull apart, eyes half-lidded and lips glossy, Dream feels hazy — like he’s just left a trance, been taken out of his lovesick stupor. The world comes back to him in waves, clearing his cloudy vision and fading the sounds of the movie back in. There’s a leftover static, tingly feeling in the places where George touched him.

“You’re such an idiot,” whispers George, playing with the collar of Dream’s shirt. “Asked me out and didn’t even realize.”

Dream only grins and presses his forehead against George’s, staring into pretty brown eyes that are glimmering with mirth. “Well it worked out, didn’t it?”

George smiles and bites back his bottom lip. “It did.”

“I got you something,” Dream announces one morning at concessions, tapping George on the shoulder.

He turns around from the register and meets Dream with an animated smile. “You did?”

“Look,” says Dream, and he pulls out a stuffed animal from behind him. “It’s a dolphin. For you.”

Carefully, George takes it out of Dream’s grasp. His fingers brush against the back of Dream’s hand. “For me?” He stares at the dolphin head-on, mouth hanging open.

“I won it at the arcade at the front of the theatre,” Dream explains, scratching at his head. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” whispers George before pulling him into a crushing hug. Dream nestles his chin into George’s hair, hooks his arms around him and squeezes tight.

George lets go first and continues staring at the plush dolphin in bewilderment. “How long did this take you to get?”

Dream wants to lie, tell him it only took a few minutes, but he knows George will appreciate the truth much more. Besides, he needs an explanation on why he didn't show up early to help George open up concessions.

He reaches over, brushes the soft fabric of the toy with the back of his palm. "Forty-five minutes," he admits sheepishly.

"*Forty-five minutes*?" George parrots, and he lets out a laugh that reverberates off of the glass of the popcorn machine. He punches Dream in the shoulder. "You're *whipped* for me."

"Am not," Dream protests, but it sounds like a lie even to him.

"I was a little mad at you for not helping me like you're supposed to, because this is your *job*," says George, crossing his arms. The dolphin is tucked in between protectively. "But I forgive you. Just this once."

"Just this once?" laughs Dream, taking his place at the register next to him.

"Don't come in late again," George threatens, but they both know it's playful.

Guests start flooding into the theatre, and soon it's no longer just Dream and George. The dolphin rests high up on the tall counter next to George, where both of them can see it. In between customers, George tangles his fingers with Dream's underneath the counter and glances at the toy to soothe himself.

Dream looks over to George and offers a gentle smile. He knows he looks absolutely lovesick, but he doesn't care.

George blushes, squeezes his hand, and smiles back.

Luckily, Dream doesn't arrive late to work ever again.

"I'm on time!" Dream pumps a fist in the air when he arrives at the staff room.

Beside him, the boy occupying his other hand facepalms. "That's because I forced you here," George groans. He lets go of Dream's hand and goes to open his locker. The toy dolphin sits inside, as if it's been waiting for George to return.

Dream grins madly. "Ten minutes before our shift starts. Are you happy, George?"

"Yes, I am," the other says dryly. "Congratulations."

"We get to go to work *together* now," says Dream, "like a couple."

George nods, his back facing Dream. "That is what we are."

When George shuts his locker, Dream grabs his arm and turns him around so they're face-to-face. Pulling George's body flush against his, Dream points out, "We don't have to argue over who arrives first anymore."

"*Dream*," warns George, "what if someone *sees*?"

He hums and presses a kiss to the top of George's head. "I don't care," he mumbles, "and they *definitely* know we're dating already, anyways."

“This is so unprofessional of you,” George grumbles, but he doesn’t make an effort to move.
“Second time this week. I’m gonna get fired.”

“If you get fired, George, I’m going down with you,” says Dream. He tilts George’s head up and kisses him slowly and gently, trying to savour every second of it.

“I hate you,” George whispers, breath hot against Dream’s lips. He stands on his toes, loops his arms around Dream’s neck and pulls him closer.

Dream brushes his nose against George’s cheek and smiles. “I hate you, too.”

End Notes

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